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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
Dana P. Jacobson, Publisher/Managing Editor
Joseph Mirando, Managing Editor
Rob Mahlert, Associate Editor

Atari Online News, Etc. Staff

Dana P. Jacobson -- Editor
Joe Mirando -- "People Are Talking"
Michael Burkley -- "Unabashed Atariophile"
Albert Dayes -- "CC: Classic Chips"
Rob Mahlert -- Web site
Thomas J. Andrews -- "Keeper of the Flame"

With Contributions by:

Kevin Savetz
Fred Horvat

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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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It's been an interesting week around here. The weather has been typically New England-ish - a few days in the 80's and then remnants of a couple of hurricanes! Naturally, I picked one of the more lousy days to play some golf before the weather really turns for the worse. But it was fun and the rain held off enough to make it a good day for playing.

I've been spending a little time on eBay lately. I recently received a newsletter from my alma mater and I started to think about my college days. I started to reminisce about some of the underground comic books we used to read in those days (yes, the hippy days of the late '60s and '70s!). I was curious if I'd be able to find some from that era on eBay. Boy, was I surprised - there were plenty available! I now own a few and will probably keep looking for more if I can find a few bargains. I've seen some go for quite a bit of money; I guess I'm not the only flower-child looking to re-capture those days! It's quite amazing what kinds of things you can find for auction these days.

Until next time...

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ATF Hosts Forums for HighWire and TOPP

In order to improve usability as well as to simplify the work with maintaining the HighWire forum, it has now become a part of Atari Talk Forums. We hope that the new forum will attract more people to frequent the forum and talk HighWire.

HighWire: http://highwire.atari-users.net

Another project that now takes advantage of the Atari Talk Forums is The Orphaned Projects Page. Now you can join in on discussions about things related to the work carried out on TOPP.

TOPP: http://topp.atari-users.net

New NE2000 MiNTNet Driver for EtherNEC and PCI

There are new drivers for MiNTNet available at http://assemsoft.atari.org. You will find NE2000 drivers in EtherNEC and PCI versions. Also updated RTL8139 drivers are available. Have a look.

Megastar - New Game

Megastar is the first ST game actually published by ASM Software. This is a little freeware shoot'em up made with SEUCK for up to 2 players.

Graphics are quite bad, it is more of a hobbyist style game than a commercial grade shareware game.

http://www.asmsoftware.de/megastar.html

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING

compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho, friends and neighbors. Mother Nature is messing with us here in the northeast again... Not as much as she's messing with Louisiana, but she's letting us know that, like any female, she likes to keep us guessing.

While the last couple of weeks have been cool and generally pleasant, the past few days have been warm and humid. It's been just another unexpected surprise along the road, I guess.

For those few people who actually enjoy reading my rants (for whatever reason), I'm sorry to say that I'm in a generally calm mood at the moment. I guess that this just proves that I'm not a complete jerk.

I mentioned Louisiana a little while ago. Hurricane Lili kept us guessing right up until she made landfall. The last report I heard before she hit land was that she was a category 4 hurricane that was heading for category 5 quickly. Of course, when I woke up the following morning the storm was about to make landfall and had not strengthened to a category 5 storm as predicted, but had weakened to a category 3 storm.

Now, meteorology isn't really one of my interests, but I do find it interesting that, even with the millions of dollars worth of equipment around the country and around the world, no one had predicted that the storm would weaken so quickly. I guess that Mother Nature just didn't bother reading the predictions. <grin>

Well, let's get on with the news, hints, tips, and info available from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
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Ken Springer asks about finding diskettes:

"If you can find 720K double density disks in a store, what seems to be the going price?"

Edward Baiz tells Ken:

"I have seen boxes of 10 for under $5."

Dave Wade adds:

"I just bought 100 in 10 very nice solid "flip boxes" of 10 disks, complete with labels for £2.00. (i.e. about 4 dollars) at a Radio Rally. For those of you in the U.K. the sellers were the Computer Junk Shop in Widnes. (tel 0151 520 6671) and they had thousands.

They also had 5.25 inch real floppies which they were giving away...."

Michael Gale asks about an ST version of A.P.E.:

"I enjoy the software program entitled A.P.E. very much (http://www.atarimax.com/) when I use it in conjunction with my Atari 800 XL. Could someone tell me if a similar programme exists for the Atari STf machines? A.P.E. has a lot of features, but I suppose the only requirement I would place on the Atari STf version would be support for loading applications from my PC and running them on the Atari (just like A.P.E.).

Thanks for any information you can provide."

Mark Bedingfield tells Michael:

"welllll, better prepare that can of worms. There are major differences between the ST and an 800XL. From this point of view the drive access is 180 degrees different. The 8-bits are Serial and low speed, the drive access is governed by the drive and not so much the computer, so fooling the 800XL into thinking the PC is a 1050 disk drive is relatively basic. Now the ST itself controls the drives and all the data busses are Parallel. The through put is much higher. It would require a pretty impressive interface to connect a PC to an ST in that fashion. Also pretty pointless seeing as you can plug just about any PC drive into an ST.
That being said there are a few ways to pinch PC peripherals, GHOST will set up your PC as a drive Letter, and accessed like any other drive, but it is SLOW, as it uses RS-232. Also you can network, using Ethernea. And there is Parcp, as well which uses the Parallel port.

Shutting the can of worms, hope that helps."

Michael Gale tells Mark:

"Thanks for the reply. You're right, of course, and the issue with the differences in speed hit me shortly after posting the message. I would like to try the application called GHOST, however, before I look into connecting my Atari STf to our network. Could you or someone else tell me

where I could find this mysterious application?"

Mark tells Michael:

"Have a look at http://www.atari.org/hosted/quickfaq/stfaq_4.htm

It should answer most of your questions."

Edward Baiz adds:

"There is a program called 800XLDJ that emulates an Atari 8-bit disk drive. Works with the SIO2ST(PC) cable. The same one that APE uses. Just hook up the XL to the ST (goes in modem port) and you are all set. You will be able to load 8-bit programs to th XL from the ST desktop.

http://wwwstud.ira.uka.de/~s_tomczy/dj800.html"

Rob Jenkins asks about using an LCD display with a Falcon:

"Can I use an LCD screen with an Atari?
Would save me a lot of space in the studio.I’m assuming as long as it does the correct refresh rate, I’ll be OK."

Henk Robbers tells Rob:

"Most modern TFT screens are multisync and can handle refresh rates from 60 to 75 Hz and all common resolutions within their capacity.

Generally spoken: they all can simply replace a standard ..VGA monitor.

So if your Falcon drives a common PC monitor, you’ll be OK.

Note however that TFT screens only work satisfactory in their rated resolution.

For instance, if you buy a 15 inch 1024/768 TFT, make sure (by trying out on a standard throw-away CRT) that your Falcon can do that.

I might be possible that you must adjust your video-mode parameters, but that would be the case with CRT’s as well mostly.

I have 17" TFT’s on the TT (NOVA MACH card) and on the MILAN running razor sharp at 1280/1024.

It is every penny worth the money.

What I like very much either was the lack of scaring noises when switching."

Peter Persson adds:

"I am using an Hitachi 15" TFT screen with my F030. Works great. Be sure to run in a screen mode suitable for the monitor, or the display will get a bit unsharp."

JØrôme Ginestet adds his thoughts:

"Using A F030 with a TFT can be much better than with a CRT.
This is because in a TFT screen the refresh rate is not dependent of the vertical frequency of the input signal.
I use use a 15" TFT at 1024*768 (non-interlaced) with a refresh

rate (vertical frequency) < 50 Hz (with Videl clock = 50MHz)
It displays an image of very good quality, whereas doing the
same on a CRT would be painful due to the low refresh rate."

Stephen Moss asks about a modem for his Falcon:

"I am considering connecting my Falcon to the internet, however I am
unsure what modems are compatible. The modem on my parents PC Modem
kept loosing the connection, a problem that was solved by replacing it
with a modern V90 compatible modem.
Based on this it would appear that a modern V90 56K modem would be the
way to go but will these operate with the Falcon or should I be
looking at older secondhand modems?"

Robert Schaffner tells Stephen:

"You can use any AT-command driven modem with an serial port.
ELSA, ZyXEL or other like this. On Falcon use latest HSModem7 serial
driver for best results."

Ekkehard Flessa adds:

"They surely will, as long as they are external, provide a serial
connector (no USB) and "understand" normal AT commands. For use with telefax
programs such as StarFax, it’s got to be fax class 2 compatible."

Thomas Havemeister asks about games for the STE:

"Is there a list available, which shows all STE - enhanced games?

What’s up with the compatibility between ST and STE machines? Do you
have some links in comparison between both computers? I’m new to the
STE line and want to use the enhanced options..."

Stephen Moss tells Thomas:

"I don’t know however any software that states it is for the ST, STE or
Mega STE software should run on the STE although it may not have been
written to make use of some of the STE’s additional features.
If it does not state this (ie STE/Mega ST only) then it is unlikely
that it will run on an ST as it uses the enhanced colour palette and
so the display is unintelligible or more likely because it uses the
Blitter and the program will crash as it cannot process the graphics
commands. Although some games like Dragons Lair were coded to run on
the ST but to also take advantage of the STE’s enchanced colour palette
if it is available.

The main differences are as follows...

1) Stereo Sound output
2) Two additional "enhanced" Joystick ports on the left hand side -
these accept both digital and analog input are for use with Light
Guns (for shooting games), Paddle Controllers, analog Joysticks and
the Jaguars "Jagpad" controller although I’m not sure how many games
made use of them.
3) Memory is provided on 30 pin SIMM Boards as opposed to PCB mounted
which makes upgrading the memory easier if you can find the SIMMs
4) Enhanced Colour Palette using four bits for each of the three
primary colours providing a total of 4096 Colours as opposed to the
ST’s 3 bit, 512 colours.

5) Blitter Chip installed for improved graphic (sprite) handling
6) There were also some improvements to TOS, if memory serves you can use desktop icons (shortcuts) to run programs from the desktop without having to go through the file menu.

I’m sure someone will correct me if this is incorrect."

Steve Stupple adds:

"Generally STE enhanced games will tend to be STE or Falcon only.

Some STE friendly games, although the coding is ok, can fail on the disk protection, the good old Rob Northern suddenly springs to mind.

Some early STOS games also fail!

BUT... it isn’t all doom and gloom, there are ways around many of the problems. Using a disk based TOS version, like v1.09, will allow you to run rebel STOS programs on the e’s.

Another problem, but rarer, is that some software doesn’t take into account the change of address for the screen memory and presume it remains at the same location. There is software so that you can fool the computer into thinking it’s only got half meg memory.

A few of the ’e’nhanced features on the e’s are:

improves sound and stereo output
improved colour palette
blitter chip
2 enhanced joystick ports, you can use the Jaguar gamepad in some games such as ’substation’
easily upgraded

I think more serious software has been written to take advantage of the extra bits than games.

Hyperpaint 2, which is the same as Hyperpaint but allows the use of the hardware scrolling and enhanced palette.

Music Maker 2, again same as music maker but with the enhancements for the sound.

TCB tracker allows you to change treble and bass.

Are just a few of them."

Paul Nurminen asks for help with a SyQuest drive:

"A friend of mine is setting up his 1-meg ST (TOS 1.02) with a SyQuest EZ135 drive that I sent to him. He is using the ICD Link II along with the ICD driver.

He can format and partition a cartridge, but once he’s done that, the ST still won’t recognize, or boot from the drive.

The EZ135 is the only drive connected to his ST. It is set to SCSI ID 0 (zero). When partitioning under the ICD utilities, he correctly sets up the first partition as a GEM partition, so that it will be bootable.

After partitioning, if he re-boots, and tries to install drive C on the desktop, he can add the drive icon to his desktop, but clicking on it tells him the drive doesn't exist. And attempting to run the ICD Utilities to configure and set up the drive as the boot drive doesn't work either - it tells him there are no bootable drives.

The drive itself works fine, as I had it connected to my Falcon for a while before sending it to him, and I was able to use it without any trouble. And he previously had a JAZ drive connected to his ST, which worked well until recently. He thinks it stopped working because his cartridge went bad, but now, seeing the trouble he's having getting the SyQuest to work, we're starting to wonder if there might be something wrong with his Link II, or perhaps the SCSI cable itself? Although if that were true, I don't think the drive would even format with the ICD utilities.

Anyway, can anyone think of anything else to try to get this to work? It's been a while since I messed around with hard drives and ICD software on an ST (since I really only use my Falcon with HD Driver these days). He doesn't own any other hard drives, and ICD is the only driver software he has at this time."

Ingo Rose tells Paul:

"I use the ahdi driver and it works fine!
try to fish the latest version out of the net."

Derryck Croker adds:

"I suppose that he's terminated the drive? The EZ135 needs a plug-in terminator block in the setup you've described."

Paul tells Derryck:

"Oh yes, absolutely. I sent him one with the drive, and he told me it's attached."

Well folks, that's all for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Video Games Shares Battered!
  """""""""""""""""""""""""""""""   Console Makers Count On Games for Xmas!
                                    GameBoy Goes Java! 'The Thing'!
                                    And much more!

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Video Game Shares Battered After Nintendo Warning

Shares of video game publishers and specialty retailers fell on Tuesday, the first day of the key holiday quarter, after Japanese console giant Nintendo Co. Ltd. cut its earnings targets and hardware shipment estimates for the year.

Although Nintendo said demand was weak in some key markets, it also said it hoped to gain a significant share of the U.S. market between now and the end of the year.

Analysts said domestic game producers should not be all that impacted by Nintendo's reduced forecast.

"While today's news is certainly not a positive for Nintendo, we believe the implications for the U.S. companies is minimal," Credit Suisse First Boston analyst Heath Terry said in a client note. "We believe investors should use today's weakness to add exposure to the group in front of what should be a strong holiday season."

On Tuesday, Nintendo said it would cut its hardware shipment targets for the rest of the fiscal year, through next March. It cut its estimate for the GameCube console to 10 million units from 12 million, while cutting the handheld Game Boy Advance to 15 million units from 19 million.

Nintendo cited weak demand for its hardware in Japan and Germany as the reason behind the cut.

The company raised its shipment targets for GameCube games to 55 million units from 36 million but lowered its Game Boy Advance games target to 50 million units from 57 million.

It also slashed its group current profit forecast for the first half of the fiscal year, ended in September, to 7 billion yen ($57.5 million) from the previous estimate of 30 billion yen ($246.2 million).

Nintendo blamed the shortfall on the rise of the yen against the dollar during the period, which resulted in an appraisal loss of 29 billion yen ($238 million) on foreign currency assets.

"We believe that this announcement will be initially perceived as negative for the U.S. software publishers, as many analysts will conclude that lower demand in Germany and Japan for Nintendo hardware is an indication of lower worldwide demand for all video game software," Wedbush Morgan analyst Michael Pachter said in a research note. "We disagree."

He said the fact Nintendo was raising its software estimate for GameCube while lowering its hardware estimate was an indication of stronger software sales, good news for both game publishers and the retailers who draw higher margins on game sales than on console sales.

The $149 GameCube competes in the United States against the $199 PlayStation 2 from Sony Corp. and the $199 Xbox from Microsoft Corp.

Nintendo also said it had no plans for a further price cut for the GameCube this year, but said it hopes to expand its share of the U.S. console market to 33 percent after the holiday season from a current estimate of 20 percent.

Game Console Makers Look to Software This Season

Last year, all Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo wanted for the holidays was to get a bundle of new game machines under Christmas trees -- and they were willing to lose money to do it.

This year the leading console makers have visions of big-money software sales dancing in their heads.

The holidays are a make-or-break season in the $30 billion video game sector, with the fourth-quarter shopping spree accounting for up to half of some game companies' yearly sales.

As they jostle for position, Microsoft Corp. is pushing to open up the Xbox for online fun, Nintendo Co. Ltd. is trying to expand its audience and Sony Corp. is battling to hang on to its top spot.

"This is a day in, day out street fight for consumer mindshare," said John O'Rourke, head of Xbox marketing. "Share points are won and lost based on how well you execute."

To underscore that point, Microsoft this week said it would buy U.K. game developer Rare Ltd. for $375 million in cash.

Even though the peak of the holiday shopping is still months away, game makers are eager to get their software and accessories out now, hoping to build buzz, analysts said.

The Yankee Group consultancy estimates that the console makers lose anywhere from $37 to $117 on every game box they sell -- steep, since Nintendo's GameCube sells in the United States for $149, with Sony's PS2 and Microsoft's Xbox at $199.

That makes game software -- particularly in-house games -- the major remaining profit engine. Major third-party publishers typically pay a royalty to the console maker and keep the lion's share of profits for themselves.

Microsoft, which wants the Xbox to become a digital entertainment hub that changes the living room in the same way the personal computer reinvented the workspace, is running headlong into "Xbox Live," the online gaming service it will launch on Nov. 15.

Demand for the new games is high -- Microsoft said more than 100,000 gamers tried to enroll in Xbox Live tests and orders from retailers for the service's online connection kit really started to accelerate in mid-September.

That kit, which includes a game, a headset for voice communications and a year's subscription, will cost $49.

Meanwhile, more than 200 Xbox games will be on the shelves by year end. Among the upcoming titles Microsoft is counting on are "Quantum Redshift" and "Blinx: The Time Sweeper," which has garnered heavy buzz among the gaming press.

But while industry watchers say Microsoft has shown its staying power, some also question whether its big bet on online gaming will prove a breakaway hit just yet.

"It’s definitely something exciting for the enthusiast gamer, but we’re in a marketplace where that doesn’t really matter anymore," Dan Hsu, editor of fan magazine Electronic Gaming Monthly, said.

Nintendo, which once dominated the game market, is now running a close third and fighting to keep pace with Microsoft in the market for home-entertainment consoles.

The company, which still dominates the handheld game market, is banking on three main game titles to bring cheer to its holiday season: "Super Mario Sunshine," "Star Fox Adventures" and "Metroid Prime," executives said.

"We recognized that this holiday season was a crucial period," Peter MacDougall, the executive vice president of sales and marketing for Nintendo of America, told Reuters.

Mario, released in late August, is the latest installment in the biggest franchise in gaming and follows the adventures of Nintendo’s signature chubby plumber.

"Metroid," and "Star Fox" are key for Nintendo because both are geared toward players in their late teens, an audience outside the company’s stronghold of children aged 6 to 14.

Nintendo remains less optimistic than its rivals, and particularly Microsoft, on the near-term prospects for online gaming. "I don’t think anybody in the industry believes, certainly this year, that online is going to be a major factor in the market," MacDougall said.

Sony, the market leader, is pinning its fortunes this season on untested games like "Ratchet & Clank" and "Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus."

Getting a head start on Microsoft, the company also launched its own online adapter for PS2 in August, months before Microsoft launches Xbox Live.

"The initial launch of the network adapter was an unquestionable success," Kaz Hirai, the president of Sony Computer Entertainment of America told Reuters. In fact, Sony might top its target of selling 400,000 of the adapters by the end of 2002, he said.

But Jeetil Patel, an analyst at Deutsche Bank Securities, said Sony has been losing market share in sports games, a key category. Sony’s key games this season are also new franchises, a risk in a business that prizes proven concepts, he said.

Even so, all sides agreed that year-end game sales would be generally strong despite the still-weak economy.

"I think that history has proven that this business is recession-proof," Hirai said.

GameBoy Goes Java

Security was remarkably tight at the recent Night of Java event held in Yokohama, Japan. Dedicated to new software and budding developers of applications for Java enabled mobile devices, details regarding the event were kept strictly under wraps until the evening of the show. Invited guests were transported aboard a ship called Merlene Shuttle in small groups and treated to private demonstrations. Once inside, most guests quickly realized the need for the security and the decision to hold the event on a mobile venue.

More aptly, the highlight of the evening was a GameBoy software emulator. Expected to run on most Java enabled phones, the application allows users to load game images (ROMs) of software for Nintendo’s classic monochrome handheld. The entire emulation program takes up less than 20KB according to event organizers. The demo version of the emulator on display at the show was admittedly slow, however, programmers insist the finished version will run at normal speed. When complete, the emulator is expected to support more than 1,100 GameBoy games. Thus far, Nintendo representatives have refused to comment on the emulator.

’The Thing’ Puts Chills Into Computers Game

If someone tells you they’re going to "chill out" and play "The Thing," the new $50 computer game for Windows, Xbox and PlayStation 2, you should take them literally. Here’s an adventure that can send shivers down your spine.

It’s not just the fact that the game is set in the middle of an Antarctic blizzard, and the sounds of the wind and crunching snow will probably make the room feel 10 degrees cooler. It’s also the hyper-aggressive creatures that lurk both in the snow banks and throughout the research stations you’ll visit in this raw, gritty adventure.

The game may be called "The Thing," but don’t expect to fight just one monster. There are big, lumbering, hard-to-kill Things and LOTS of little pesky, quick-to-kill-you Things, not to mention the fact that you can easily fall prey to some freaked-out humans as well.

The origins of the game hark back to the 1951 movie that had James Arness playing a deadly vegetable thawed from the ice. It was more like the monster movies of the Cold War era than the John W. Campbell Jr. story "Who Goes There," on which it was loosely based.

In Campbell’s story, the creature was a shapeshifter trying to survive. Director John Carpenter tried to stay true to that element of the story when he remade "The Thing" in 1982; as the alien spores were able to taken on human shape.

The new game takes place in the present day and keeps things in Antarctica. As Captain Blake, you and your squad land at a research facility and soon stumble onto some badly chewed-up bodies, plus clues that a horrible creature -- or creatures -- has overwhelmed the personnel at the base. Poke around and you’ll discover a UFO hidden in a cave. Poke around a bit more

and you'll find that whatever was aboard the spaceship is somehow spawning malevolent, misshapen creatures that are all teeth and no tact.

Spend too much time outside and you'll freeze to death. Spend too much time inside and the chances are good that these E.T.s will EaT you alive. And, as in the Carpenter movie, because the aliens can take on human shape, the paranoia level is off the scale.

It's the non-interactive sequences that are the game's worst enemy. Not since the el cheapo Godzilla movies has dialogue been dubbed this badly. At least the Godzilla films had to be translated from Japanese into English. The folks at Computer Artworks in the U.K., who developed the game, don't have that excuse.

It has other design issues. On the PlayStation 2 version, the left joystick, which you use to run, also makes you crouch if you push down on it. There were a few places where I was trying to flee one of the monsters and, in my panic, I tended to push down on the joystick, allowing the creature to catch me. (Before I realized how to control the crouch, you should have seen me trying to run through the snow, all bent over like a guy trying to cope with a mega-wedgie.)

My other complaints are generic to these types of games. When the creatures die they dissolve into the floor without a trace; better games leave the bodies intact. There were instances where I had to blow away some boxes to get access to a broken electrical switch. I cleared away most of them, and it seemed as though there was plenty of room to work on the switch. Nonetheless, the game wouldn't let the engineer fix the switch unless all the boxes had been destroyed.

There's a stupid icon-over-the-head system that will send you scrambling for the handbook so you can translate what the character is trying to say. Sometimes the icons seem absolutely meaningless, such as when a character seemed to want to talk to me, yet wouldn't say anything except "Oh, okay" when I tried to find out what was wrong. Sometimes the icons popped up and disappeared so fast I couldn't catch them. At another point, a commando indicated he needed ammunition. I tried to give it to him, but the game said, without explanation, that I couldn't. Such "you can't do this but we won't tell you why" moments are frustrating.

Finally, after getting through 20 percent of the game, I still don't know how to find my health meter. I found myself wasting medical kits to bring myself to full health when I didn't really need to. From what I saw, the only time the health meter appears is when you're in combat (when you're too busy to pay attention to it) and when you're using a med kit (where you might discover you were already healthy to begin with).

"The Thing" has interesting "trust" and "fear" systems. Before a character will follow your commands you must earn his trust by giving him, for example, a weapon or more ammo to defend himself. It gets interesting if the character turns out to be infected with the alien virus.

You also need to prevent your characters from freaking out, which can happen if you let them see too much of the gore, or they're terrified of the creatures. I had to order one medic to stand in the corner of the infirmary to settle him down after he spied one of the Thing's victims, with a massive hole in his side and his head wedged against the wall at an angle that would break anyone's neck.

That's one thing this game does well -- give you the heebie-jeebies.

Game Company Gives UK Drivers Free Ticket to Speed

A computer game company’s offer to pay the speeding fines of all British drivers as part of an advertising promotion for a new motor racing game has been branded irresponsible and dangerous by the government.

Acclaim Entertainment said on Wednesday it would refund the fines of any driver caught by speed camera on October 11 to mark the launch of a new PlayStation 2 driving game "Burnout 2: Point of Impact."

Acclaim spokesman Shaun White said the company did not condone speeding but wanted to "ease the financial pain a bit."

"Taking the side of people who enjoy driving fast, it therefore seemed quite logical to offer people caught by camera something that would make them feel OK about it," he said.

But the Department of Transport said the campaign would be likely to promote speeding and encourage dangerous driving.

"If they want to foot what is likely to be a hefty bill, that is their choice. But we cannot condone something that so obviously encourages people to break the law and do something dangerous," a spokesman said.

"Basically they are encouraging people to speed and to break the law. I just hope for their sakes that none of these people ends up knocking down a child.

It is not the first time the computer game company has attracted headlines over its marketing campaigns.

A call for people to change their name by deed poll to Turok, the hero of a dinosaur-hunter computer game, in return for $770 attracted more than 3,000 applicants in August.

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

PayPal Gets Checked by Scams

During the past two weeks, online payment service PayPal has been targeted by scam artists trying to get the personal information of its users, including credit card data, user names and passwords.

On September 16, an unsophisticated scam e-mail, slugged "PayPal Verification," was sent requesting users to log into their PayPal accounts

"ASAP" to confirm they were still active users of the service.

The e-mail read:

"We are now requesting the password to the e-mail address you signed up to PayPal with. This is so our systems can confirm the confirmation e-mails off PayPal stay in your account because there has been a rise in the amount of fraudsters getting access to users e-mail addresses and deleting the Paypal confirmations. This is to protect you and ourselves. PayPal will use this information for fraud protection only."

The e-mail went on to say that it was sent as part of the Mountain View, California-based company’s new annual process to screen out inactive accounts.

Recipients were then given a link that seemed to go to PayPal’s secure site, but the site was actually a fake, or spoof site.

Then on September 25, another, more sophisticated e-mail, slugged "URGENT: PayPal System Problems" arrived in some users’ in-boxes.

That message, which arrived as an HTML e-mail set up to resemble PayPal’s Web site, read:

"Today we had some trouble with one of our computer systems. While the trouble appears to be minor, we are not taking any chances. We decided to take the troubled system offline and replace it with a new system. Unfortunately this caused us to lose some member data. Please follow the link below and log into your account to make sure your information is not affected. Account balances have not been affected."

The hackers even offered unsuspecting users their next two transfers at no charge.

The URL listed in the e-mail took users to an official-looking site that asked for their personal data, including user name, password and credit card information.

PayPal spokeswoman Julie Anderson said the company hasn’t had a problem with its site and said spoof sites are very commonplace. She said the scam artists probably got hold of a database and sent messages to thousands of people hoping to hit some PayPal account holders.

"[These scams] happen often, and they happen often to successful Web sites like eBay, PayPal, and other financial services sites," Anderson said. "Fortunately, we know from experience that PayPal users are for the most part savvy enough not to fall for them. But in the end, if they do, they are certainly not liable for any losses."

A "whois" search on the URL used in the scam shows that it was registered on Sepember 10 by Confinity, in Palo Alto, California. However, Confinity, which originally developed the technology used by PayPal, no longer exists, and the telephone number listed has been disconnected.

As soon as PayPal learned of the scam, Anderson said, it contacted the Internet service provider and asked it to take down the spoof sites. That has been done.

Anderson said PayPal also notified the appropriate law enforcement agencies, including the FBI. However, she said, PayPal didn’t move to notify

its 18 million users of the problem.

Russ Cooper, a security consultant at TruSecure in Herndon, Virginia, said PayPal should take steps to alert its users to the scam. He said he was appalled that the company relied on users to determine that the e-mails they got were bogus.

Charles Kolodgy, an analyst at IDC in Framingham, Massachussets, agreed, saying most people respond to e-mails without thinking about their veracity. He said vendors handling sensitive data should consider using technology that would allow users to determine whether an e-mail has been sent by that vendor and not a scammer.

Such technology, he said, could include a signature key that would be confirmed by a trusted site, special cookie files or a unique password that could be accessed only by the user and the vendor.

Although PayPal has a security center on its site--complete with tips for users, including a warning that they never share their PayPal password with anyone--the company should think about putting that information, as well as a message about this scam, in a more visible position on its home page, Kolodgy said.

PayPal Shareholders OK eBay Merger

PayPal Inc. shareholders approved a $1.3 billion merger with eBay on Thursday, brushing aside legal challenges to the deal with the online auction giant.

A majority of the company’s 61.6 million outstanding shares were voted in favor, and no one at the sparsely attended meeting voiced the objections raised in lawsuits over the share price and patent infringement allegations.

The all-stock acquisition gives eBay control of the Internet’s largest purveyor of online payment services between individuals and businesses. When the deal closes later this year, PayPal insiders will collectively reap, on paper, nearly $600 million.

For eBay, the acquisition should fatten an already bulging bottom line. About two-thirds of PayPal revenues come from fees generated by eBay auction transactions. PayPal has some 20 million registered users, including 3.7 million business accounts. Since 1999, PayPal says it has moved an estimated $10 billion through the online service.

Under terms of the merger agreement announced last July, PayPal shareholders will receive 0.39 shares of eBay stock for every share of PayPal. EBay’s offer valued PayPal at $23.61 per share on the day of the announcement, a price touted by both companies as an 18 percent premium above PayPal’s market value before the merger was announced.

Based on eBay’s close Wednesday, PayPal stockholders would receive $20.79 per share. EBay closed Wednesday at $53.30, while PayPal closed at $20.75.

In trading on the Nasdaq Stock Market, PayPal shares fell 53 cents to close Thursday at $20.22 while eBay shares fell $1.40 to $51.90.

If eBay stock remains near its current level, former PayPal CEO Elon R. Musk will receive nearly $148 million worth of eBay stock, while Michael Moritz, a director, and his investment firm, Sequoia Capital will collect about $111 million. PayPal CEO Peter A. Thiel will reap nearly $58 million and the company's chief technology officer, Max R. Levchin, stands to make $36 million.

Their big payday was the catalyst for at least six shareholder lawsuits filed in Delaware and California seeking to halt the merger. Plaintiffs in those cases claim the eBay offer was inadequate and they should receive more. The California cases have been placed on hold pending a decision in the Delaware courts.

On another legal front, Bank One Corp., the nation's third largest credit card company, sued PayPal in Delaware on Sept. 6 alleging infringement of its patents on an electronic payment system.

The merger may put eBay into competition with itself for awhile since one of PayPal's major competitors is Billpoint, an eBay subsidiary that processes credit card payments for online purchases. Analysts believe eBay will eventually fold Billpoint into PayPal's operations.

New E-Mail Virus Targets Windows, IE

A new e-mail-borne virus variously known as Tanatos and W32/Bugbear is being circulated as an e-mail attachment and appears to target machines running Microsoft operating systems, according to alerts issued by a number of computer security companies.

The virus file is attached to e-mail messages with a wide variety of subject lines such as "bad news," "Membership Confirmation," "Market Update Report," and "Your Gift," and appears to use randomly generated names to avoid detection by antivirus software, as well as multiple file extensions to disguise the fact that it is an executable file, according to Vincent Gullotto, vice president of the McAfee Anti-Virus Emergency Response Team at Network Associates.

Once activated, the virus shuts down scores of vital processes used by Windows and by antivirus software; records user keystrokes; opens a backdoor to the infected machine for use by attackers; and attempts to mail copies of itself out to other users, randomly generating new subject lines and virus executable names as it does, according to Gullotto.

Despite receiving numerous copies of the virus from customers and partners, however, antivirus researchers at AVERT have been unable to get the mail function of the virus to work, says Gullotto.

"All samples we've seen may not be the result of a mass mailing produced by someone launching the virus. We could just be witnessing the seeding of the virus, by the author, rather than evidence that it's working on other systems," says Gullotto.

The new virus takes advantage of a known vulnerability in Microsoft's Internet Explorer versions 5.01 and 5.5 that allows attackers to embed malicious code in the header of an improperly formatted HTML message that could cause e-mail clients such as Outlook to automatically launch attached executable files.

Microsoft addressed the issue in Service Bulletin MS01-020 and issued a patch for the vulnerability in March 2001.

The fact that the virus targets a known and patched vulnerability, coupled with its apparent inability to mail itself, makes security experts such as Gullotto doubt that this new threat will spread too widely.

"At this point [AVERT] is rating this a medium risk. We don’t expect it to be a big issue."

Still, Gullotto advises users of Internet Explorer to make sure that they have applied any available security patches. Users of Internet Explorer 5 are particularly vulnerable to infection by Tanatos, he says--especially if they are not blocking e-mail attachments.

And, as with all new viruses, the appearance of Tanatos points to the need for IT managers to take a hard look at vulnerabilities in their network infrastructure.

"People need to revisit their security policies and practices," says Gullotto.

"I know that it’s a lot of work to stay on top of these patches--Microsoft released 50 of them this year alone. But you have to weigh your risks--are you going to do nothing and wait for something to happen, or are you going to find a way to incorporate patching into your processes?"

Another New Worm Takes Aim at Windows

A new worm that targets machines running Microsoft’s Windows 95, 98, and ME operating systems is spreading, according to virus alerts posted by several leading antivirus software makers. Named "Opasoft", "W32/Opasoft", or "Opaserv," the new virus takes advantage of a common Windows application program interface and loose security practices to spread over local and wide-area networks.

Unlike other worms that spread from computer to computer over the Internet by way of infected e-mail messages, Opasoft takes advantage of the Network Basic Input/Output System (NETBIOS), an API containing functions used to send and receive data over Microsoft networks, according to the announcements.

Once it hits a machine, Opasoft scans the infected computer’s network for other machines to attack. When a vulnerable machine is located, the worm checks to see if the C: drive of that machine has been shared with other network computers and can be accessed, according to the alerts.

If it can access the C: drive, Opasoft places a copy of itself on that machine, then alters the win.ini file so that the worm is run the next time the machine is restarted.

If the shared directory on the computer is password-protected, the Opasoft worm will attempt to enter that folder by trying single-character passwords.

Office and home computer networks that are using any of the affected Windows operating systems and that have enabled file sharing between

machines on the network are particularly vulnerable to infection by Opasoft. This is especially true if passwords have not been established to protect access to shared directories on the network, according to a statement by security company Kaspersky Labs.

Although it is not known whether the Opasoft worm damages any files on the machines it infects, the worm does open a back door from the machine to a Web site, www.opasoft.com, from which updated versions of the worm and other script files are downloaded.

The Opasoft Web page was not accessible as of Friday afternoon.

For computers infected with the worm, users are instructed to delete the worm and make necessary modifications to the win.ini file.

All users are asked to install "strong" passwords for any shared folders on their computer--combinations of three or more letters, numbers, and special characters.

Opera Offers Browser Bargain

In a bid to get more universities and colleges to use its Web browser, Opera Software launched a special licensing program that lowers the cost of the browser to as little as $1 per copy when purchased in volume.

Opera won’t specify the exact number of licenses that an institution of higher education must agree to buy to qualify for the $1-per-copy price, but it has to be more than 50, said Opera spokesperson Live Leer on Tuesday. The standard per-copy price for educational users is $20, with volume discounts starting when an institution purchases 10 or more licenses, she said.

"When a customer wants to buy over 50 licenses, we talk to them individually and come up with a deal, but 50 is not enough for the $1 price," she said.

The Opera Web browser is an alternative to the browsers given away by Microsoft and Netscape Communications. Opera, in Oslo, offers a free browser, but that version contains advertising.

Opera’s program for higher education can be seen as an extension of the Global Donations Program launched in May. The donations program provides free licenses to elementary schools, as well as to organizations for the physically challenged and to Web designer schools and programs.

Jasper Kalkman, IT administrator at The American School of The Hague in the Neth
erlands, said the school looked at Opera but
chose not to use it. Instead, the school opted for Internet Explorer on machines running Microsoft’s Windows and Apple Computer’s Mac OS operating systems.

Some machines running Mac OS X also have the Chimera browser installed, according to Kalkman. "[It’s] a beautiful and very fast browser," he said. Chimera is a browser for Mac OS X based on the Mozilla open-source browser code.

Opera lists nine universities on its Web site that it says use its browser.

Microsoft’s Internet Explorer, however, dominates the browser market and is used by 96 percent of Internet users, Internet researcher WebSideStory said in late August. Netscape is used by 3.4 percent of Internet users, leaving only 0.6 percent for "other" browsers (including Opera), according to the researcher.

New $199 PC Doesn’t Do Windows

It’s been about 20 years since a new Atari 400 or Commodore Vic 20 could be had for less than $200. Even then, those relics were well on their way from bargain bins to the dust bin of PC history.

Since then, few if any new computers have sold for less than $200. Any that did were seriously outdated or inoperable.

Now, in a challenge to established tech giants, several upstarts have banded together to create a PC that retails for $199.86.

It doesn’t do Windows. In fact, it doesn’t do a lot of things.

The Microtel SYSMAR710, sold only at Wal-Mart’s online store, runs on a Linux operating system variant called Lindows, which has been hyped as a new choice for consumers who want to break away from the Microsoft monopoly.

The Lindows computer does show signs of inspiration but they’re overshadowed by the fact that this inexpensive system is simply cheap, underpowered and needs work on both hardware and software.

In other words, you get what you pay for.

It might be useful for those who limit their computing to surfing the Web, sending e-mail or playing simple games. Or curious experts who can handle the Linux techno-traps that haven’t been dumbed down by Lindows.

For most, it may be wiser to save for a truly useful computer, which can be had for a few hundred dollars more.

The Microtel system runs on an 800-megahertz C3 microprocessor from Via Technologies, with 128 megabytes of memory, an anemic 10 gigabyte Maxtor hard drive and an NEC CD-ROM.

It’s packaged in an unstylish beige box that would give Steve Jobs nightmares.

The $199 price tag does not include a monitor, modem or floppy drive. It does have an Ethernet networking port for high-speed Internet connections. Otherwise, a system with a modem costs $230. Monitors, which must be purchased separately, start at about $150; floppy drives can be bought for $20.

The setup instructions are woefully inadequate, consisting of a diagram of where to stick each plug. My system included a glossy book on the computer’s motherboard but no instructions for the operating system.

Once assembled and powered up, the computer made a high-pitched noise that

I first thought was a noisy CPU fan but later discovered was the hard drive.

It takes 2 minutes to boot up - considerably longer than the 45 seconds for my Mac or the 1 minute for my Intel-based Windows machine. Programs also take much longer to launch compared to my Windows PC and Mac.

The operating system is pleasing to the eye, with colorful balls representing various program and categories. The desktop is navigated much like Microsoft’s operating systems.

But in the rush to make things easier, Lindows removed from the default setup some of the most useful features of Linux, including virtual desktops and user accounts. Users are logged on automatically as an administrator, making the system vulnerable to hackers and self-destruction.

Lindows does make progress in one of Linux’s most frustrating aspects. It built a mechanism for finding, installing and running software.

Lindows’ "Click-N-Run Warehouse" is as easy as surfing through a list of 1,600 programs, selecting the ones you want, waiting for them to download and clicking a button to run.

It worked most of the time.

My biggest complaint is that the $199 PC includes only 10 programs. Unlimited access to the warehouse costs another $99 a year.

Many of the programs were developed by open-source hobbyists. Though some are fun or useful, most are not polished. Solid documentation is rare.

All the programs offered through Click-N-Run are also available elsewhere on the Internet to anyone who can figure out how to download them and get them installed on a Linux computer without Lindows’ hand-holding.

The Click-N-Run Warehouse also does not list system requirements. I downloaded a game called TuxRacer but discovered afterward that it required a lot more power than my SYSMAR710 was able to handle.

I also downloaded Sun Microsystems Inc.’s StarOffice, a polished knockoff of Microsoft’s Office productivity suite. It’s free to Lindows users and generally worked well, though it loaded very slowly.

StarOffice’s open-source twin, OpenOffice, also is available for free but it never installed properly on my system using Click-N-Run.

An incomplete early version of America Online for Lindows also is available. Lindows also ships with Netscape’s latest browser.

As the name Lindows suggests, there is limited support for some Microsoft programs. I installed and ran Office 2000, though the word processor occasionally crashed when I tried to save documents.

Ultimately, Lindows is indeed about choice - one that doesn’t cost a lot of money but may end up costing considerable frustration and disappointment.

Sony’s New Vaios Made for DVD Burning

Sony released details on several new Vaio desktop and notebook PCs targeted at home multimedia use Tuesday, hoping to boost its holiday-season sales amid a stagnant PC market.

Six new Vaio PCs were released to kick off the fourth quarter: two new notebooks, a new notebook series, and three new desktops, Sony says in a release.

All the new PCs come with DVD-RW drives, and Sony's Click to DVD software, which allows consumers to choose from a variety of DVD burning options. Users can simply burn DVDs, or bring in digital still photos and music to create a multimedia presentation, Sony says.

PC manufacturers are latching onto recordable DVD technology as a way to boost a flat PC market. Business investment in PCs has not returned, so PC makers are trying to boost consumer sales through a plethora of multimedia features, analysts say.

Confusion over recording standards has caused problems among consumers, but Sony is playing both sides of the fence, releasing DVD-RW technology as it works with the DVD+RW Alliance.

Sony's summer line of PCs also focused on multimedia technologies for the consumer.

The three new desktop models feature some of Intel's fastest Pentium 4 processors. The less expensive PCV-RX860 comes with a 2.4-GHz Pentium 4, 512MB of DDR SDRAM, an 80GB hard drive, SIS651 integrated graphics, six USB 2.0 ports, and an IEEE 1394 port for video downloads for about $1,300.

The PCV-RZ14G adds a 2.53-GHz Pentium 4, a 120GB hard drive, and Nvidia's GeForce4 graphics technology for about $1,700.

The high-end PCV-RZ16G features most of the same specifications, but uses a 2.66-GHz Pentium 4 and a total of 1GB of DDR SDRAM for around $2,000. All three PCs run Microsoft's Windows XP, and will be available in October.

For notebook users, Sony has added two new models, as well as a build-to-order notebook series. All three notebooks are the first models from Sony to use internal DVD-RW drives, it says. The PCG-GRX670 uses a 2-GHz Intel Mobile Pentium 4-M processor, 512MB of DDR SDRAM, a removable 40GB hard drive, a lithium ion battery that provides up to 4.5 hours of battery life, and ATI Technologies' Mobility Radeon 7500 graphics technology for about $2,500.

The PCG-GRX690 also uses a 2-GHz Mobile Pentium 4-M, but adds a removable 60GB hard drive for about $2,800.

Wireless 802.11b connectivity is optional on both notebooks, and each features one IEEE 1394 port and three USB ports. They weigh in at 8 pounds with a single battery and measure 14 inches high by 11.5 inches deep by 1.8 inches high at the rear of the laptop.

A base configuration of the new NV200 series of notebooks comes with a 1.7-GHz Mobile Pentium 4-M processor, 256MB of DDR SDRAM, a fixed 30GB hard drive, and a 4.5-hour lithium ion battery for $1,799. All three notebooks are available in October.

Also in the release, Sony announced the addition of an external DVD-RW

drive to its lineup of products, so users of older Vaio models will be able to start burning DVDs on their notebooks. It will be available in October with the Click to DVD software, and two IEEE 1394 ports for about $600.

Rival notebook manufacturer Toshiba also announced this week it will sell DVD-recordable/RW drives for both notebooks and desktops. Pricing information was not available.

HP Unveils New PCs for the Holidays

Hewlett-Packard unveiled Friday its bid for a chunk of the holiday PC-buying market: Five new notebook and three new desktop models, all featuring such consumer-friendly features as built-in CD-burning hardware and software.

The new HP Pavilion 503n will be HP’s least-expensive desktop Pavilion PC, with an estimated retail price of $499. It features an Intel Celeron 1.7-GHz processor, 128MB of RAM, and a 40GB hard drive. No monitor is included.

Two new higher-end desktop models--the 753n and the 763n--also offered without monitors, include software for digital video and photo editing and are being targeted at customers seeking more advanced multimedia and gaming capabilities.

The Pavilion 753n will run on a 2.53-GHz Intel Pentium 4 processor and include 512MB of RAM and an 80G-byte hard drive, with a DVD-ROM drive and IEEE 1394 ports for high-speed data transfer. The 753n is priced at $999.

At $1,249, the Pavilion 763n is the most expensive of HP’s new desktop offerings. It also runs on a Pentium 4 2.53-GHz processor and includes 512MB of RAM, an 80GB hard drive, and IEEE 1394 ports, but also features an HP combo CD- and DVD-writer dvd200i drive, an additional CD-ROM drive, and an Nvidia GeForce4 MX420 graphics card.

HP’s other two new Pavilion desktops, the 503n and the 753n, have no separate graphics card, relying instead on Intel’s built-in Extreme Graphics technology.

All three of the new desktops include front-access USB 2.0 ports and Ethernet interfaces. The 753n has a street date of October 6; the 503n and 763n will follow a week later, with an October 13 release.

HP is offering a $100 mail-in rebate on its gaggle of new Pavilion notebooks, each of which includes a DVD/CD-RW combo drive.

The new lineup starts out with the ze4115, priced at $1,199 (factoring in the rebate) for a 14-inch display, Advanced Micro Devices Athlon XP 1500+ processor, 256MB of RAM, and a 30GB hard drive. For $1,349, the ze4125 offers a 15-inch display, AMD Athlon XP 1600+ processor, 256MB of RAM, and 40GB hard drive. These two laptops begin shipping on October 6.

HP’s most feature-laden ze4100-series model, the new ze4145, offers a 15-inch screen, AMD Athlon XP 1800+ processor, 512MB of RAM, and 40GB hard drive. It is priced at $1,499 and begins shipping on October 13.

HP also added two new Pentium 4-based notebooks to its ze5000 portfolio. The $1,699 ze5155 notebook includes a 15-inch display, a Pentium 4 1.8-GHz processor, 512MB of RAM, and a 40GB hard drive. It starts shipping on October 13. At $1,999, the ze5185 has a 2.4-GHz Pentium 4 chip, 15-inch display, 512MB of RAM, and a 60GB hard drive. It began shipping on October 1. The new ze5000 models also include ATI Technologies' Mobility Radeon graphics technology.

All of the new Pavilions will be available in retail stores nationwide and at HPShopping.com, HP says.

UPS Latest to Sue Internet Ad Co.

United Parcel Service is suing an Internet advertising company whose software causes ads to pop up on Web surfers' computers without their permission.

The filing last week makes UPS the most recent in a series of companies to file claims against Gator Corp. of Redwood City, Calif. UPS is seeking an injunction and unspecified damages against Gator for what it contends are unauthorized pop-ups that have included ads for rival FedEx.

"We don't like it when a customer goes to our site to track a package and ends up getting pop-ups for online psychics or dating services," UPS spokesman Norman Black said.

Officials for Gator, which runs an ad network that claims 22 million active users and 400 advertisers, declined comment Tuesday. Gator's Web site says its ads are legal and reach only customers who agreed to accept ads in exchange for free software.

More than a dozen media companies, including The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, won an injunction against Gator after filing a lawsuit in June that called Gator a "parasite."

The companies claim Gator's pop-ups illegally appeared and diminished the value of paid ads.

Internet users get Gator advertising software when they install a separate product for filling out online forms and remembering passwords. Gator also comes hitched with free software from other companies, including games and file-sharing programs.

As users surf the Web, Gator runs in the background and delivers advertisements on top of what the surfer would normally get at a site.

Lawmakers Tout Digital-Media Consumer Rights

With an eye on the next session of Congress, two Democratic lawmakers have waded into the ongoing battle between Hollywood and Silicon Valley with bills that seek to protect consumer rights in the post-Napster era.

Neither bill stands a chance of becoming law before Congress adjourns for the November elections, but both will likely serve as early makers in the

digital-media debate that will continue on Capitol Hill next year.

While they take different approaches, both Virginia Rep. Rick Boucher and California Rep. Zoe Lofgren aim to clarify "fair use" rights, which allow consumers to make limited copies of books, movies and music for personal or academic use.

Long a central part of copyright law, fair-use rights allow consumers to record TV shows on their VCRs, make cassette tapes for their cars, back up software used on their computers, and quote novels or poems.

But the boundaries of fair use have blurred in the digital era, as computers, CD burners and peer-to-peer software like the now-defunct Napster have allowed consumers to make unlimited, perfect copies of copyrighted works.

Media companies and consumer-electronics firms have struggled to find a balance that would allow consumers to use MP3 players and other new gadgets while at the same time protecting copyrighted material from widespread piracy.

In a statement on Wednesday, Lofgren said consumers needed a voice in the debate.

"Right now, it is the entertainment industry versus the technology industry, and the consumers are watching from the sidelines," Lofgren said.

At a press conference to unveil his bill on Thursday, Boucher said he did not want fair-use rights to erode as the two industries negotiate technological fixes.

"Library patrons may well find that instead of material being available on the library shelves for free as it is today, new material delivered to the library will only be available on a pay-per-use basis," Boucher said.

Congress has weighed in on the digital-copyright issues before, passing a law in 1998 that, among other things, made it a crime to bypass copy-protecting technologies.

The law has figured prominently in several disputes, at one point leading to the arrest of a Russian engineer who developed a method to get around copy-protection features on Adobe Systems Inc.’s digital-book reader.

Boucher’s bill would modify the 1998 law to allow consumers to defeat copy-protection measures as long as they did not then pirate the material. For example, a blind person would be allowed to modify Adobe’s digital-book reader so it could read text aloud, he said.

The bill would also provide protections for scientific research and establish a standard warning label for copy-protected CDs that may not work in computer drives.

Lofgren’s bill takes a more straightforward approach, specifying that fair-use rights currently protected in the analog realm should apply to the digital world as well.

Just as a consumer has a right to give away or sell a book, the bill would allow the consumer to sell a digital book so long as he does not keep a copy.

Technology companies such as Intel Corp . and Verizon Communications lined up to support Boucher’s bill, which has also drawn the backing of traditional fair-use advocates like the American Library Association.

"This is the first time in 20 years where consumers are going on the offense, rather than playing defense," said Gary Shapiro, president of the Consumer Electronics Association, which backs both bills.

The movie industry’s top lobbyist objected to both bills, saying they would prevent movie studios from protecting their works against piracy.

"If this bill were to be enacted, content owners would be left with two unhappy choices: protect their valuable works by not making them available in digital formats such as DVD, or lose all control over unauthorized reproduction and distribution," Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, said about Boucher’s bill.

The Business Software Alliance, a software-industry trade group, voiced a similar objection.

The Recording Industry Association of America declined to comment on either bill as it had not yet seen the specific language, but a spokesman for the trade group said mandatory labels for copy-protected CDs were not necessary, as the industry was developing guidelines of its own.

Music Companies Go to Court Vs. Verizon

The music industry goes to court Friday to try to force an Internet service provider to identify a subscriber accused of illegally trading copyrighted songs, setting up a legal showdown that could indelibly alter the free-swapping culture that has been a signature of the Web’s early years.

If successful, the suit against Verizon would pave the way for ailing record companies to send out reams of cease-and-desist letters to alleged music pirates, scaring them into submission rather than going through the long process of suing each one in court.

Verizon general counsel Sarah Deutsch said a record industry victory would harm the privacy rights of Verizon subscribers and force Internet providers to give up the names of its customers without judicial review.

"There are plenty of companies that have business problems that would like to write a letter-writing campaign to hundreds of thousands of people," Deutsch said. "We’ll be a turnstile."

The case, which will be decided in U.S. District Court here, is the music industry’s latest attempt to clamp down on illegal file sharing. Through programs like Kazaa, Morpheus and Gnutella, a person can find virtually any song or movie, sometimes even before it’s released in stores, and download it for free. On a typical afternoon, about 3 million people were connected on the Kazaa network and sharing over 500 million files.

Verizon has already agreed to hand over the subscriber’s name if the music industry trade group, the Recording Industry Association of America, files a separate "John Doe" suit against the subscriber. The RIAA refused. Top RIAA lawyer Cary Sherman said anti-piracy laws don’t require a separate

suit, which would require more time and expense.

"One of the things we're discovering is that people are not aware that they are engaging in conduct that is clearly illegal," Sherman said. "If you got a letter from RIAA saying we know that you're doing this, I'd say there's a pretty good chance that you would stop."

At issue is the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, passed in 1998 to protect copyright holders from piracy. It was created out of a compromise among Internet providers, technology firms and content owners. Now both Verizon and RIAA are saying the other isn't living up to the deal.

Most file-traders keep their music and movies on their own computer, only using their Internet provider as a pipeline to trade, and Verizon says RIAA only has an automatic right to know the subscriber's name if the copyrighted music sits on a Verizon-owned computer.

The music companies disagree.

"It wasn't the compromise that we agreed to," Sherman said. "There's nothing in there that suggests that it only applies when they are carrying the material."

Some language in the DMCA refers to "Information Residing on Systems or Networks," rather than the alleged infringer's own computer, but the judge will have to decide if that phrase should apply to the entire request.

Some of the technology industry's fears are listed in a friend-of-the-court brief filed by an Internet provider trade group. They cite some overzealous automated programs that identify alleged pirates and shoot out an automatic letter to their Internet provider without checking the facts.

In one case, Warner Bros. demanded a particular subscriber be disconnected for illegally sharing the movie "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone." But the computer file identified by Warner Bros. in its letter indicated that it wasn't the "Harry Potter" movie but a child's written book report.

Another letter, to Internet provider UUNet, wanted a subscriber cut off because they were sharing songs by former Beatle George Harrison. But some files were not songs at all. One was an interview with Harrison, and another was a 1947 photograph of a "Mrs. Harrison."

"In all other cases where we use a subpoena process, it is subject to judicial supervision and control," Verizon's Deutsch said, adding that the DMCA does not provide for any penalty for misusing subpoenas.

The Verizon subscriber at the center of this process was sharing thousands of songs on the Kazaa network, including some by Beck, Billy Joel and Janet Jackson. According to the Internet address cited in court records, the person is located in the Pittsburgh area. But the person may be oblivious to the fact that he or she is in the center of a controversy between the giant companies.

"Our general policy is to inform a user when we receive a subpoena," Deutsch said. "Since in our view this isn't valid, we haven't gotten the consumer involved in the debate."

AOL to Deliver Online Amber Alerts

The nation’s largest Internet service, America Online, will begin transmitting Amber Alerts about abducted children onto the screens of computers, pagers and cell phones of more than 26 million subscribers in dozens of states and cities.

Beginning in early November, warnings issued across the patchwork of communities that use the system will go to AOL users in those areas who request to receive them. All but one of the existing Amber Alert systems are participating with AOL.

"This is really the first time that an entity such as AOL has reached out to all the existing Amber plans across the states," AOL spokesman Nicholas Graham said.

Amber Alerts began in Arlington, Texas, after the 1996 abduction and murder of 9-year-old Amber Hagerman. Law enforcement agencies send to broadcasters descriptions of the missing children, their abductors or other information. The alerts also are broadcast on electronic highway signs.

President Bush is appearing Wednesday at the White House Conference on Missing and Exploited Children in Washington, amid efforts by activists to expand such electronic notification systems.

Some states, like Texas and Oklahoma, already send Amber alerts via e-mail. But the AOL announcement is nationwide and can reach people through the AOL service on their computer desktop, cell phone or pager.

AOL’s 26 million members can pre-register by entering their ZIP code to receive alerts in any of the states, counties and cities that participate. Travelers and people near state borders can enter multiple ZIP codes, Graham said.

Graham said the company is "strongly considering" putting Amber Alerts on AOL’s market-leading Instant Messenger, which has 150 million members.

"We believe the more individuals that avail themselves of the Amber Alert service will help with the goal of finding abducted children," Graham said.

Joann Donnellan, a spokesman for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which has guided the Amber Alert system, said the center likes the AOL plan because it is voluntary and targets specific AOL members to receive alerts near them.

"They’re not going to spam the country with Amber Alerts," Donnellan said.

The center will be talking to several other Internet companies, including Microsoft, TerraLycos and Yahoo, to take part in the online Amber Alert system.

Thirty-two children have been found as a result of Amber Alert, including several rescued this summer.

The Senate approved a bill in September that would provide $25 million to help localities set up Amber Alert systems nationwide. Similar legislation is moving through the House.

According to the center, about 725,000 children nationwide were reported missing to police last year, or about 2,000 children per day.

AOL is working with Amber Alert systems in Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Wisconsin and the District of Columbia.

On the Net: National Center for Missing and Exploited Children: http://www.missingkids.com/

Microsoft Escapes From Google 'Hell'

Microsoft is no longer considered to be hell, according to the Google search engine.

Last week, Computerworld reported that if someone typed the phrase "go to hell" (with quotes) into Google's search engine, the No.1 ranked search result was Microsoft's home page. AOL.com ranked a close third behind the site Hell.com, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill came in sixth.

Just two days later, however, Hell.com topped the list of search results for "go to hell," and Microsoft, AOL, and UNC were nowhere to be found--at least not in the top 30 diabolical search results.

So, what happened?

"Every 30 days Google switches over to a new index," said Nate Tyler, spokesman for the Mountain View, California-based Web search company. "Every time we do a new crawl of the 2.4 billion Web pages, we come up with a new index."

Tyler said it was just a coincidence that the index was refreshed right after the Computerworld story appeared.

Even so, Danny Sullivan, editor of the Darien, Connecticut-based newsletter "SearchEngineWatch," isn't so sure.

Sullivan acknowledged that Google constantly performs updates and that on Thursday, September 26--the day after Computerworld's story appeared--the search engine company made significant changes in how it looks at links across Web sites.

Nevertheless, Sullivan said he wouldn't be surprised if humans examined the search indexes to see what was producing Microsoft's No. 1 ranking in the "go to hell" search--and to figure out a better way to rank sites. (Google's indexes are updated automatically.)

"That would have been done separately from the [automated] changes that were made," he said.

Sullivan said that one reason Microsoft initially topped the "go to hell" list of Web sites was probably that Google searches look at the number and target of people's "go to hell" links. If a lot of people had "go to hell" links pointing to Microsoft, then Google might conclude that it was the

best match for that search.

In fact, Sullivan said, searching for the phrase go to hell Microsoft (without quotes) served up 273,000 Web pages, though a number of those pages have come up in the past two weeks. And a search on the phrase go to hell AOL (again without quotes) returned 412,000 Web pages, he said.

Those results suggest that a number of people don't think highly of those two companies, Sullivan observed.

By comparison, a search on the phrase go to hell Ghandi returned just 7430 Web pages, he said.

"It seems a lot of people are telling those companies to go to hell," he said.

Court to Accept E-Mailed Excuses

Tell it to the judge, or better yet, e-mail it to the judge.

County officials are setting up a program under which people who get traffic tickets can e-mail their excuses and explanations to a judge. Until now, they'd have to sit for hours in court, waiting for a hearing.

So far this year in the county, there have been more than 1,200 people who want to explain to a judge the circumstances surrounding their traffic tickets.

After reading the e-mails, the judges will send their reply either by e-mail, or an old-fashioned postcard.

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